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Livestock & Seed Division

Meat Grading & Certification Service



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USDA Meat Grading & Certification Service



The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA), Agricultural Marketing Service, Livestock and Seed Division, Meat Grading and Certification (MGC) Branch provides voluntary quality grading and certification services that are widely used by the Nation's livestock and meat industry. Headquartered in Washington, DC, the MGC Branch has approximately 235 meat graders and 35 supervisors assigned to approximately 110 field locations throughout the United States.

Since its beginnings in the early 1920's, meat grading has facilitated the marketing of livestock and meat nationwide. Uniform meat grade identification has provided a standardized way of communicating values between buyers and sellers and reflecting consumer preferences back through marketing channels to the producer. Further, grading permits uniform marketing of certified meat and meat products for distribution to feeding programs in this country and abroad.

What Is Meat Grading?

Meat grades identify carcasses for differences in value-determining characteristics associated with quality and/or cutability of meat. Species eligible for grading include beef, veal, calf, lamb, and pork. The quality grades (Prime, Choice, Select, etc.) reflect the palatability and eating quality of meat. The yield grades (1 through 5) identify carcasses according to the amount of usable lean meat.

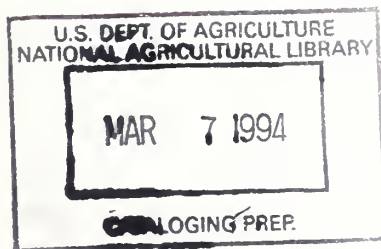
Industry members who request meat grading services may choose to have meat carcasses quality graded, yield graded, or both—depending on the species and the official USDA standards. Although these grade standards are (to a large degree) subjective in nature, they are based on carcass characteristics that over 75 years of experience have proven to be practical and reliable measures of carcass value. Over time, numerous changes in the grade standards have been made to reflect new research and shifting marketing practices, thus ensuring that meat grades are kept up to date to more effectively serve a constantly changing, dynamic industry.

Where and How Meat Grading Is Performed

Meat graders perform grading services in plants where cattle and other livestock are slaughtered, chilled, processed, and shipped to retail outlets or other plants for further processing. With continual practical application of the meat grade standards, graders maintain a well-trained eye that can quickly and accurately make correct grading decisions that comply with the nationally established grading pattern.

To ensure uniform and accurate grading decisions nationwide, the following requirements must be met before meat is eligible for grading: (1) meat may be graded only as a carcass or side and (2) only at the point of slaughter or initial chill (except veal and calf); (3) meat carcasses must be properly ribbed (when required), (4) adequately chilled, (5) easily accessible, and (6) adequately illuminated. These combined requirements provide a high degree of assurance that all grade-determining factors will be visible for evaluation by the grader. A carcass whose visible grade factors or characteristics have undergone changes because of external influences (i.e., such conditions as extreme temperature changes, dehydration, or the rigor of physical handling) cannot be accurately evaluated or graded.

Quality grades can be applied to beef, lamb, veal, and calf. Yield grades can be applied to beef and lamb only. The pork grades consist of a combination quality and yield grade. Quality factors (depending on the species) include such characteristics as maturity (bone ossification), marbling, fat streaking, color,



texture, firmness, etc. Yield factors include characteristics such as ribeye size, amount of external fat, percentage of kidney, pelvic, and heart fat, etc. Official standards prepared by the Standardization Branch in Washington, DC, clearly define the procedures and regulations for determining final quality and yield grades as applicable. The use of these standards as a guide assures uniform application of grade placements.

Two methods are utilized throughout the meat industry to present meat carcasses for grading: stationary rails and moving chains. In stationary rail grading, the grader reviews and grades carcasses by walking from one to another as they hang side-by-side from rails suspended from the ceiling. In chain grading, graders remain in a stationary work site while the carcasses, suspended from hooks, move past the grader on a mechanically operated, conveyer-like chain. A major advantage of chain grading is that the stationary work site provides optimum lighting conditions and sufficient room for fully evaluating carcasses very quickly. In multigrader plants, graders are relieved at frequent intervals to maintain a high degree of grading accuracy.

What Is Certification?

Under the certification service, a meat grader reviews and accepts meat and meat products that fulfill certain specific requirements. Products certified under an individual specification number assure the receivers of a routinely consistent, acceptable product that meets their feeding needs. These certified products are ordered and purchased by both public and private large-quantity meat buyers such as hospitals, schools, restaurants, hotels, airlines, and the military.

When a large-quantity meat buyer decides to use the certification service, prospective suppliers submit their bids to the buyer on the basis of the specifications. Before the meat is delivered, an official USDA meat grader checks the product to make sure it complies with the specifications. The MGC Branch uses specifications such as the Institutional Meat Purchase Specifications (IMPS) and Federal and military specifications, which list requirements such as correct cut, fat thickness, weight range guidelines, etc. All specifications are precise, described in careful detail so there is no doubt about what the buyers actually want and what they will receive.

Examples of types of certification services available include (but are not limited to) the following: (1) Pork belly certification for the Chicago Mercantile Exchange, which ensures that pork bellies comply with specifications before delivery on Exchange contracts. (2) Beef carcass certification services, such as the Beef Marketing Information Service and Beef Carcass Data Service, which provide detailed information on grading factors for cattle producers, feeders, meat packers, and others in the industry. (3) Product Examination Service, which provides (for those involved with meat shipments) an impartial expert to officially establish a shipment's physical condition in order to substantiate a damage claim, protect against one, etc.

Our thoroughly trained meat graders are technically competent in all aspects of meat certification, and this service is extensively used and widely accepted. The MGC Branch has been actively certifying meat items for the National School Lunch Program and other local food distribution programs for many years.

Where and How Certification Is Performed

Certification services are performed in cold storage facilities, slaughtering or processing plants, and retail stores. This service is initiated when a supplier makes arrangements with the nearest MGC Branch area office to have a grader examine product offered for acceptance. The meat grader is responsible for reviewing the product and certifying that it complies with specification requirements. The applicant for service provides copies of the contractual documents to the grader, who studies these documents, reviewing all requirements, and then examines the product, accepting or rejecting it as appropriate. During the certification examination, if the grader observes possibly unwholesome product or detects foreign material in the product, he or she immediately reports the matter to the Food Safety and Inspection Service inspector for action. This method of meat procurement assures the purchaser of a wholesome product that meets specification requirements.



The Cost of Service

For either grading or certification service, the MGC Branch charges an hourly rate as well as incurred mileage and travel time in providing the service. In today's efficient and high-volume operations, the actual cost per pound for service is very small.

A Meat Grader's Training

Meat graders are thoroughly schooled and tested in the interpretation and application of official grade and certification standards during a rigorous, 13-week formal training program conducted at a central training facility and at field stations. Following this formal training, new graders are given additional, intensive on-the-job training under close supervision to prepare them for performing grading and certification duties. The majority of graders have a B.S. degree from a college or university in animal, food, and/or meat science.

The Difference Between Graders and Inspectors

A question often asked is the difference between a USDA Meat Grader and a USDA Meat Inspector. A meat inspector works for the Food Safety and Inspection Service, a regulatory agency that assures all meat packing plants maintain wholesomeness and sanitation requirements for meat and meat products. A meat grader works for the Meat Grading and Certification (MGC) Branch, which provides a voluntary grading service for meat quality. Meat packing plants are NOT required to have an MGC Branch grader present. Only when grading and/or certification service is officially requested from a local MGC Branch office will a grader perform duties at a meat establishment. Graders cannot grade meat or provide any services unless meats offered have first been inspected.

Accuracy and Uniformity of Meat Grades and Certification

Maintaining accuracy, uniformity, and reliability of the meat grading and certification service nationwide is accomplished through a network of supervisors who assist graders and review their work. In addition to frequent supervisory reviews, other forms of control include: (1) individual grader identification codes that accompany the meat grades, (2) an independent, nationwide review team that checks grading patterns, (3) regional and national meetings held to correlate meat grades, and (4) reviews of product at destination points.

Supervisory Reviews

USDA, AMS supervisors conduct periodic, unannounced reviews of all meat graders. Supervisory reviews are conducted at locations where grading and/or certification is

performed. If the review finds any deviations, the supervisor takes prompt corrective action and schedules followup reviews. Supervisors also conduct reviews at the request of meat packing officials who wish to have a grader's grade pattern verified or certification procedures examined.

In monitoring a grader's accuracy, supervisors (1) hold grading correlations, which permit the supervisor to compare his or her grade applications with the pattern of the grader, so the grader may make any adjustments necessary to maintain the correct grading pattern; (2) question the grader on standards or specifications to make certain he or she fully understands the interpretation of these technical points; and/or (3) observe the grader during grading or certification services to ensure that all procedures are being carried out correctly.

Destination Reviews

Destination reviews are another method of evaluating the accuracy and uniformity of grading and certification services. They supplement the examinations conducted at the plant of origin. Supervisors perform these reviews at meat processing plants, warehouses, and major distribution centers in the marketing chain. During destination reviews supervisors evaluate the graded and/or certified meat to ensure that the product complies with the grade standards or specifications, as applicable. The grader identification codes and meat inspection identification accompany the meat cuts and make it possible to trace product back to the plant of origin. Grading or acceptance certificates and plant records furnish supplementary documentation for use in destination reviews.

External Reviews

Another method used to ensure accuracy and reliability of USDA meat grades is a review—called a Public Law 272 review—of federally graded meat labeling and advertising practices at the retail level. Supervisors and graders periodically conduct unannounced visits to retail outlets throughout the country to ensure that retail stores advertising and labeling meat with specific USDA grades properly display and label the meat items. These reviews serve to educate retailers about the proper use of grade labeling and advertising and also deter mislabeling and false advertising practices. In many instances, these reviews are conducted in response to consumers who complain to USDA that they did not get what they paid for.

The Value of the Meat Grading and Certification Program

In summary, the voluntary meat grading and certification service is used extensively to enhance the nationwide meat marketing system. This highly technical program provides reliable identification of value-determining factors that are important to all buyers and sellers of meat. From producers to consumers, meat grades and certification provide a common language that makes buying and selling significantly more efficient.

USDA continually strives to provide an efficient and effective service that meets the needs of all meat industry segments as well as consumers. Throughout the years, improvements in grade standards, certification specifications, and industry technology have continued to make the system more complex—yet more precise. Extensive supervision and checks and balances built into the system are designed to reduce errors and promote an honest, creditable program that will benefit consumers and industry alike. Meat grading and certification serve as part of the many USDA marketing tools that contribute to a modern, successful marketing system.

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